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Ulman is leaving behind a changed Howard

County executive saw growth opportunities, 'ran with it'

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At 32, Ken Ulman became the youngest person in the state of Maryland to be elected to the position of county executive.

Eight years later, as he prepares to step down from Howard County's top post at age 40, he's got a whole life ahead of him. At the same time, it's natural for him to reflect on his legacy as the county executive.

In the past eight years, Howard's population has grown by more than 30,000. As a wealthy suburb between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., the county, by all accounts, was poised for growth.

Ulman's supporters say he seized on the momentum.

"At the time Ken came into office, there were extraordinary opportunities to move this county forward," said Vernon Gray, the administrator of the county's Office of Human Rights. "I think he grasped that opportunity and ran with it."

"He's remade the county executive position in its entirety," said Tom Coale, a former Columbia Association board member and local blogger. "He's made it much more of a policy-rich position. Where many people might have seen the county executive as more of an adminis-

trator position, he took it on as a CEO job."

His leadership style has also been marked by a push to make Howard a first adopter of new policy ideas.

Early in his administration and before health care had become a viable focus nationally, Ulman created Healthy Howard, a public health initiative that provided basic health care services for the county's uninsured residents.

In 2010, he made the decision to ban minors from using indoor tanning beds after looking at research that showed they significantly increased a person's risk of developing cancer.

And in 2014, he launched the Roving Radish, a pilot food truck program that dropped off meal kits to designated pick-up sites throughout the county.

On the environmental front, Ulman created the first office of environmental sustainability in the state, purchased a fleet of hybrid and electric vehicles for county use, brought single-stream recycling to the county and launched pilots for food scrap collection and composting in Elkridge and Clarksville.

The construction of Columbia's Robinson Nature Center and the historic Belmont manor also expanded the county's environmental education sites to three.

The recurring phrase throughout Ulman's tenure as county executive has been "quality of life," and his budgets have emphasized funding for the schools,

libraries and public parks that have contributed to Howard's recent recognition on a national stage, from a No. 1 ranking of the county's library system from the Urban Library Council and National Library Magazine, to a Money Magazine article listing Columbia and Ellicott City among the top 10 best places to live in the country.

Despite facing a recession during his first term, Ulman avoided raising general property tax rates, although he did raise or introduce several targeted fees, including a hike in the fire tax and the implementation of the state-mandated stormwater management fee.

Ulman also took a forward-looking attitude to business development efforts in the county.

As executive, he launched the Maryland Center for Entrepreneurship, Howard's business incubator, as well as a 3D manufacturing initiative, headquartered at MCE. He often points to data that shows Howard has had the biggest growth, in real numbers, in private sector jobs throughout the state.

"I really believe that we've created a business climate where people know that the government is a partner, will get things done, work together in a productive way," he said.

Early Democrat

Ulman's career as a public servant began in 1994, with an internship at the White House.

Then a sophomore government and politics major at the University of Maryland in College Park, the experience helped him build relationships that led him to leave school early to work as the Wyoming field director for the Clinton/Gore campaign in 1996 and, later, in the administration of former Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening.

It was during those years that he first started to picture himself in public office.

"After working for a number of elected officials, I thought, maybe I could do this," he recalled.

In 2002, after finishing law school and opening his own legal firm in Columbia, Ulman decided to run for the seat of retiring council member Mary Lorsung, a west Columbia Democrat. He won the primary race, against current council member Mary Kay Sigaty, by just 36 votes.

Ulman's time on the council showed hints of the progressive politics he would later embrace as county executive. In 2006, he was instrumental in getting a controversial smoking ban in bars and restaurants approved in Howard before it became law statewide.

Later that year, with just one council term under his belt and a newborn at home, Ulman defeated Republican council colleague Chris Merdon in the county executive race.

County Council Chair Calvin Ball, a Democrat from east Columbia, started on the council just as Ulman was starting as executive.

Together, the two were the youngest chair and the youngest executive in

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Howard County history.

"We really then became the vision of moving Howard County forward," Ulman said.

Given his quick ascension from council member, to county executive, to candidate for lieutenant governor who entered the race with a flusher bank account than his running mate at the top of the ticket, it would be logical to assume Ulman's always wanted to serve in elected office.

He insists otherwise.

"No," he said in a recent meeting at the Howard County government headquarters in Ellicott City. "I knew that I loved the community ... so I always saw public service as noble, the public sector as a potential avenue to make a difference."

But, "I didn't know if I actually wanted to run myself."

Downtown focus

Ulman's also had his share of critics, who view some of his progressive policy decisions as heavy-handed.

This summer, he took heat for his executive order that banned the sale of sugary drinks and high-calorie snacks on county property and at county-sponsored events.

Legislation, sponsored by Ulman and passed by the County Council, that allowed the county to purchase Columbia's Long Reach Village Center and redevelop it into an arts village led some to protest that he had overstepped his

bounds.

Greg Fox, the sole Republican on the County Council, listed the Long Reach purchase among his biggest objections during Ulman's administration, an eight

years that he said were "spent fending off ... initiatives such as the potential use of eminent domain, the implementation of the sugary drink ban and the levying of the rain tax ... as well as numerous land use issues."

Fox said he has tried to "push for addressing existing obligations," including pension payments, rather than implementing what he sees as "unnecessary programs."

Ulman said he understands those concerns.

"We're very cognizant of the role of the public sector and the role of the private sector," he said. "The role of the public sector, in my mind, is to create the environment for the private sector to thrive. ... With that said, there's a real role for the public sector to play in creating the environment ... that enables a productive, thriving community and society. And then you get into sort of a gray area, where people can disagree, in the spectrum of public sector, private sector, where you draw that line."

Where he and the council have been able to agree has been on redevelopment of downtown Columbia, a project that has been a focus for Ulman, who grew up in the planned community, since he first ran for office.

"I do believe that if you look at areas that are thriving around the country and around the region — look at Bethesda, look at areas of Baltimore City, they're walkable, they're vibrant, there are people sitting outside at restaurants and they're livable, and so I wanted town center to pop," Ulman said of his hopes for the city's future.

As he leaves behind his role supervising these developments, he said he feels confident that town center has enough momentum for that vision to materialize.

"That's good for the long-term health of Columbia and it's good for the long-term sustainability economically of the county," he said.

As Ulman looks toward his next venture, he said he plans to remain engaged in the county — and possibly at the state level.

"I'm 40 years old, I'm as excited and optimistic as I've ever been about the future of Howard County and, frankly, the future of the state of Maryland," he said. "I wish governor-elect Hogan nothing but success and congratulations. But I've got a lot more to give, and whether that's in the private sector or the private sector, one way or another, I'm going to be involved in continuing to push for innovative solutions to our challenges."

"Stay tuned to exactly how that comes together, but I'm excited about the future, my future and the future of our state and county," he said.



FILE PHOTO BY NICOLE MARTYN

Ken speaks to fellow Democrats, including then-council candidate Calvin Ball, right, as results showed Ulman won the Democratic nomination for county executive in 2006.